

CANYON CLARION

DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA & DOMINGUEZ CANYON WILDERNESS PLANNING NEWSLETTER

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www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp.html

BLM

Advisory Council explores Hunting Grounds issues

With the help of Bureau of Land Management staff, the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council explored the issues and resources of the Hunting Ground, Zone 1 of the NCA (between U.S. 50 and the Gunnison River) on April 6. The Zone 1 report summarizes BLM data about the area.

More than 20 citizens attended the meeting. The advisory council had a quorum, with all but two members in attendance.

Geology & Fossils

Zone 1 geology is predominantly Dakota/Burro Canyon and Mancos Shale, with smaller areas made of Brushy Basin and Salt Wash, mem-

bers of the Morrison Formation. Paleontologists believe there are moderate opportunities to find fossils in the area.

As a management concern, Mancos Shale is a marine deposition evaporate, which often contains excessive levels of selenium and a variety of dissolvable salts. These components of Mancos Shale can degrade water quality when disturbed and/or irrigated.

Water

The water situation for the Hunting Ground area is limited, in that no perennial streams exist. There is, however, a large number of ephemeral streams that flow east-to-west, away from the Grand Mesa and into the Gunnison River.

Zone 1 water quality is characterized as impaired for selenium in creeks that flow directly into the Gunnison River.

Vegetation

Vegetation is predominately desert shrub/saltbush, which occupies 21 percent of the NCA. This vegetative community consists of:

- Drought-resistant shrubs like shadscale, four-wing saltbush, winterfat, snakeweed and prickly pear cactus.
- Grasses such as galleta grass, bottlebrush squirreltail, Indian ricegrass.
- A wide variety of forbs.

There are areas in Zone 1 that are not meeting Land Health Standards, with fair or poor condition for many indicators. These problems, are largely a result of a combination of some or all of the following factors:

- Proximity of this vegetative community to Highway 50, White-water, Delta and utility corridors, which cause disturbance to the area.
- Historic grazing practices between the Gunnison River and Highway 50.

Hookless Cactus

Zone 1 has rare plants, such as the Colorado hookless cactus, which is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

Wildlife

A number of sensitive wildlife species have either the potential to occupy Zone 1, or are already there. Notably, the species currently living inside the NCA include:

- desert bighorn sheep
- white-tailed prairie dogs
- Pronghorn
- northern leopard frog

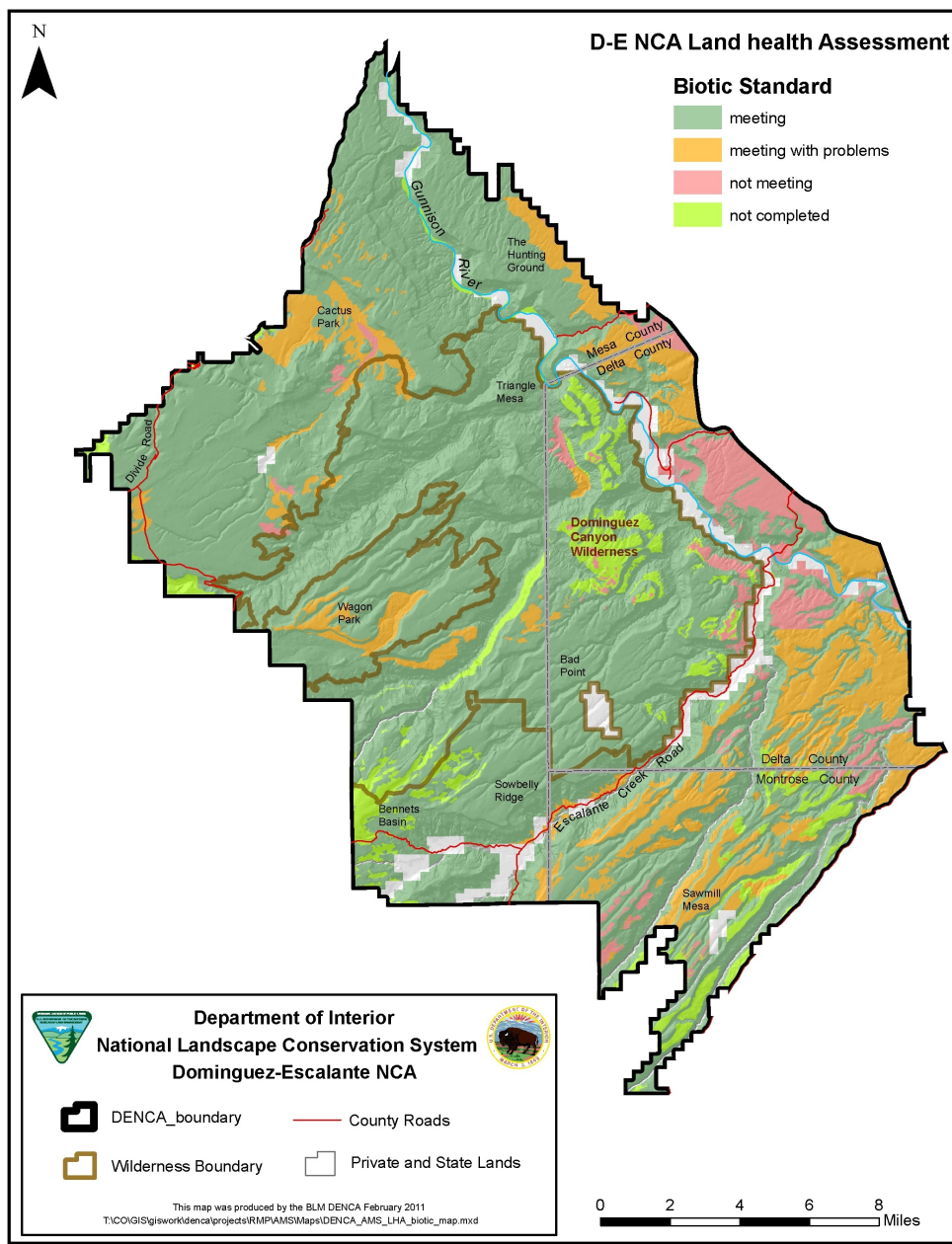


The Hunting Grounds have a high density of the Colorado hookless cactus, above, a threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area • COLORADO



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The Hunting Grounds (or Zone 1) lie between the Gunnison River and U.S. Highway 50, on the northeast side of the NCA. Much of Zone 1, above, does not meet, or meets with problems, various Land Health standards set by the BLM.

The proximity of sheep allotments to re-introduced desert bighorns and the risk of spreading disease to the bighorn sheep, is an issue that will need more study during the planning process.

Cultural

Trails are a defining, cultural feature of this area. Game animals created trails when they moved down from the Grand Mesa to the Gunnison River, and the game were followed by Native Americans. The Utes established a trade route trail through this zone, which was likely later adopted by Spanish explorers and re-

named the Old Spanish Trail. Archeologists note the presence of prehistoric camp sites and hunting blinds, rock art sites, lithic sites (where arrows, spearheads and other tools were crafted). The BLM believes Zone 1 likely has a high density of sites.

The BLM is concerned that ease of access in this zone has led to theft and vandalism of cultural sites.

At the same time, there are opportunities for cultural resource-related recreation and tourism, especially Heritage Tourism associated with the Old Spanish Trail.

One approach under consideration is landscape-type interpretation, showing the

broad sweep of game and trade trails that intersected above and alongside the Gunnison River.

Recreation

Zone 1 has not (so far) been the site of active management for recreation, and very few recreation developments are found there. The BLM has very little information about the number of visitors to this zone. Current recreational activities in Zone 1 include hiking, horseback riding, ATV and motorcycle riding, mountain biking, target shooting and dispersed camping. During the travel management planning process, routes will be assessed for sustainability and density.

Travel Management

Zone 1's routes, except for maintained county roads, were created to provide access for livestock grazing or were user-created.

The area has been designated "Limited to Existing" for motorized vehicles -- limited to existing roads and trails, with no seasonal limits. There are no "open" areas, where cross-country travel is allowed. Popular access routes include Bean Ranch Road, Bridgeport Road and Escalante Canyon Road.

Grazing

Most of the facilities in Zone 1 are related to livestock grazing, including 11 water developments (i.e. stock ponds, pipelines or catchments), five fence lines or exclosures and two cattle guards currently in the BLM's database. The cattle grazing allotments are Bean, Kannah Creek Individual and Kannah Creek Commons.

The sheep grazing allotments are Wells Gulch, Alkali Flats and Antelope.

The BLM is concerned that some Zone 1 areas are not meeting land health standards, and said there needed to be a better understanding of domestic/bighorn sheep interactions.

Public Safety

Public scoping comments identified public safety and law enforcement as a concern in Zone 1. These concerns relate to the presence of trash, particularly glass, and suspicions of illegal activity in this zone.

What's Next?

Council members concluded the meeting by discussing how best to focus on D-E NCA issues. Several noted the ten-

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-sion between desiring a high level of detail, balanced against questions of proper time and focus given the large volume of information.

Council discussions focused on the following action steps/considerations:

- Decide what issues to address and in what order.
- How deep do we go? The council asked the BLM to place agency concerns on the table and identify key issues.
- Existing field office plans could be a starting point for the council, but the plans don't meet the NCA's higher bar for resource protection.
- Given time limits and the desire to look at all the zones, council members believe reviewing the range of alternatives in other plans could be important.

- The council could review and filter topics through the access issue and address what needs to be protected.

- Council members agreed to submit their top three issues to Chair Katie Steele. She will incorporate those into a list of known issues identified by BLM staff. The list will guide the May meeting.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held May 4, at 3 p.m. at the Delta Performing Arts Center, 822 Grand Ave., in Delta.



NOTICE

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is extending the public comment period for specific areas within the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (NCA), where access was delayed by winter snow and spring runoff, to address travel management.

Public comments for higher elevation areas, which have been inaccessible due to weather and bad road/trail conditions, were extended to June 15. Those areas include:

- All of Wagon Park.
- All land north of the Escalante Canyon road, including Sowbelly Ridge and Bennett's Basin (excluding the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness).
- All land lying in between the North Fork and Main Branch of Escalante Creek.

A map denoting the above areas is available at the NCA website: www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp/DENCA_RMP_Travel_Management.html

The deadline for public comments on travel management issues for the remaining areas within the NCA is still set for May 1.

In November 2010, the BLM presented the public with an inventory of combined routes within the NCA. The combined routes are used for hiking, horseback riding, off-road vehicles or any other means of transportation. The BLM is seeking public assistance to add information on any additional routes the initial inventory might have over-looked.

To determine and consider future recreational and other multi-use access to the NCA, the BLM is also seeking public comments on which routes should be considered a priority in future planning and why the routes are important for recreational use.

The BLM received public comments from hikers, equestrians, OHV riders and their respective organizations. The comment period extension was requested by groups wanting additional time to look at specific trails.

FACT FILE VEGETATION COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION

Vegetation Community	Number Acres	Percentage of upland area in NCA
Desert Shrub/ Saltbush	46,352	22.4%
Mountain Shrub	5,680	2.8%
PJ Woodlands	129,740	62.9%
Ponderosa Pine	766	0.4%
Sagebrush Shrub-lands	23,873	11.6%